

## **Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Essay Contest – 2004**

### **First Prize: Brisa P. Halviatti, The Northwest School**

Although racism isn't nearly as oppressive as it was thirty years ago, it still lingers around our every day lives. Subconsciously, stereotypes about different cultures are used in conversation almost every day. One of the most memorable museums I've visited was the Los Angeles Museum of Tolerance. In order to enter the exhibit area, you have to choose one of two doors. One is labeled, "Prejudiced", the other, "Non-Prejudiced". The tour guide asked, "Which door would you like to go through?" Some people said the "Non-Prejudiced" door, and a few said the "Prejudiced" door. When our guide had heard our answers she replied, "No one can enter through the Non-Prejudiced door, because it's forever locked." Then she continued, "That door is locked because nobody is completely unbiased." I think the point she was trying to make was that as long as we are ignorant about racism, the longer it will linger on, and the struggle continues...

I am Mexican and Iranian, and currently racism has been affecting my life more than ever. I remember not really identifying with my Iranian background in elementary school because most students didn't know where Iran was. I would just say I was Mexican. But now, in 8th grade, I identify as both. I remember last year a fellow student in my class came up to me and said that I shouldn't talk to the Jews in my class because I was Middle Eastern, and if they said something I didn't like, I might just come to school with bombs strapped to me and blow myself up like "my relatives" were doing "back home." I remember exactly how I felt, angry, outraged and, most of all, hurt. To think that he thought I was a suicide bomber just because I was part Middle Eastern was very hurtful; especially when I do not have anything against Jews (many of my close friends are Jewish). The stereotypes didn't stop there. Most of the other stereotypes weren't directly targeted at me; they were just against my heritages in general. For example, this year at Halloween, many of the students dressed up in costumes. I clearly remember one student dressed up as a silly Mexican singer. He had a sombrero, a guitar, a caricature like outfit and a mustache. He jumped around like a drunk while singing "La Cucaracha" and strumming his guitar. Most people laughed, but I just hung my head and walked away. I was very offended, especially since no one paid any mind to it; even the teachers didn't seem to care!

Dr. King wanted everyone to be treated with equal respect. Today, that struggle still continues... People are still manipulated because of their ethnicity or class background. People are still homeless, wars are still being fought, and children in third world countries are dying of colds and fevers, things that we can take a pill for. In order to change these things, we first need to have hope. We need to believe that we can create a better world. We must be confident in what we are doing and never give up the struggle. Dr. King believed. "This hope is our hope. This is the faith that I go back to the south with. And with this faith, we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope. With this faith we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to stand up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one

day." (From the speech "March on Washington")

The Civil Rights Movement in the United States was huge. People decided not to put up with the racist system they were dealing with. This Movement began with protests and boycotts challenging the segregation between blacks and whites. One of the most famous boycotts was the Montgomery bus boycott in 1955, when Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on the bus to a white man and was arrested. This incident triggered the Civil Rights Movement because blacks (and white people who supported them) witnessed one strong soul standing up alone. This act alone inspired thousands of people who decided to stand strong together.

Martin Luther King Jr. became a part of the Civil Rights Movement around the 1950's, but he was always fighting for justice. In 1957 he helped form the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), an organization of black churches and ministers that aimed to challenge racial segregation. Dr. King also formed strong bonds with many white people up in the north, along with many churches leaders and ministers.

Dr. King and I are very different people. I am female, he is male. I am Mexican Iranian, he was black, I am 13, and he was an adult, yet we both wish to see a change in our country, and our world. But in order to change others, we must first change ourselves. We can't end racism or stereotypes while thinking racist thoughts or using stereotypes. Racism has been stitched into this country's quilt of history. Michael Moore in his book, *Stupid White Men* wrote, "...and yet when I turn on the news each night, what do I see? Black men alleged to be killing, raping, mugging, stabbing, gangbanging, looting rioting, selling drugs, having too many babies, dropping babies from tenement windows, fatherless, motherless, Godless, penniless. The suspect is described as a black male. No matter what city I'm in, the news is always the same." (*Stupid White Men...and Other Sorry Excuses for the State of the Nation!*, Michael Moore, Page 59) Unfortunately, this is proof, along with the other examples in the previous paragraphs that the struggle really does...continue. With hope and courage, we can empower and inspire people around us to change our society. I believe this is what Dr. King would have asked of each of us.

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